

Loss of Warfighting Capability at the Chinook Company Level

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Loss of Warfighting Capability at the Chinook Company Level  
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to

Major PJ Nugent, CG 10

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To keep up with the ever-changing face of battle, the United States Army, like most warfighting organizations, has undergone significant transformation in the past few years. In an effort to enhance combined arms operations at the tactical level, assets typically assigned at the Corps or echelons above Corps (EAC) level have been realigned to provide direct support to the Army's ten active divisions. Within the Army Aviation transformation process, the CH-47D Chinook company is one such warfighting organization that has been moved from Corps to Division level.<sup>1</sup> To facilitate this move, individual Chinook companies have changed from the H-series Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) to the J-series MTOE, resulting in a significant loss of warfighting capability at the company level of employment. The post-transformation CH-47D company, now with twelve aircraft instead of sixteen, has lost a disproportionate amount of senior leadership and all operational and logistical assets that made the company self-sustainable. In the Army's attempt to become more flexible for task organization and more modular at the company level, it has crippled one of the most robust company-level organizations it possessed.

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<sup>1</sup> 4 March 2004 Statement by MG James D. Thurman (then Director, Army Aviation Task Force, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3, United States Army) before the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee, Committee on Armed Services, United States House of Representatives, on Aviation Industrial Base and Department of Defense Rotorcraft Programs, p. 3.

## **Comparing the pre-Army Aviation transformation Chinook company MTOE to a post-transformation MTOE**

The most obvious distinction between the old and new MTOEs is that the number of aircraft per company has been reduced from sixteen to twelve.<sup>2</sup> The CH-47D heavy-lift helicopter company, considered a corps-level asset prior to transformation (with minor exceptions in remote locations), is now part of a general support aviation battalion (GSAB), which performs aerial command and control, limited air assault, air movement, and air medical evacuation in support of an active Army division. Prior to transformation, active Army divisions such as 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, and others did not possess an organic heavy-lift capability. In order to populate each of the Army's ten active divisions with CH-47Ds, given the limited number of Chinooks the active duty Army possesses, the number of aircraft per company was reduced by four. Assuming an operational readiness (OR) rate of 75%, this reduces the average number of flyable aircraft per company from twelve (75% of sixteen) to nine (75% of twelve).

### **Reduced capability to the customer**

What does this reduction in the number of airframes equate

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<sup>2</sup> FY04 MTOE from 2d Battalion, 52d Aviation, Camp Humphreys, Republic of Korea. FY06 MTOE from 3d Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Aviation, Fort Drum, New York.

to in terms of reduced capability to supported units? In air assault missions, supported units will put roughly one hundred less troops into the landing zone on the first lift; on the second lift, six less high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs); and on a third lift, perhaps three less M198s. Although the UH-60 Blackhawk is the primary air assault platform under Army Aviation's new combat aviation brigade structure,<sup>3</sup> the task for aerial movement of troops, supplies, and equipment in support of maneuver remains at the forefront of the heavy-lift mission.<sup>4</sup> In certain theaters of today's current operating environment, the Chinook has proved itself one of few rotary-wing platforms in the Department of Defense inventory still able to perform its wartime mission at full capacity. As long as Chinooks continue to be utilized in the air assault role, the ground tactical commander's ability to mass combat forces at the decisive time and place will be significantly reduced due to the loss of four CH-47Ds per company. The same can be said when performing a heavy-lift general support mission, as three less flyable platforms will be available per company to support the division. With each Chinook carrying an average payload of 18,000 pounds, that equates to a loss of

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<sup>3</sup> Diagram from 4 March 2004 statement by MG Thurman to the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Derived from mission statements of General Support Aviation Battalion (parent unit) and its subordinate Chinook company as stated in FY06 MTOE from 3d Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Aviation, Fort Drum, New York.

54,000 pounds of supplies per each company-level lift.<sup>5</sup>

### **Loss of senior leadership**

With the reduction of four aircraft per company, the logical deduction would be a similar reduction in terms of aviators assigned to operate the aircraft. A pre-transformation Chinook company rated thirty-six officers, thirty-five of which were aviators. Given sixteen aircraft to operate, that equated to approximately 2.2 aviators per airframe. The post-transformation company, with its twelve aircraft to operate, rates twenty-four officers, all of whom bear aviation wings. Although the company retains two aviators per airframe, the level of senior leadership within the company was drastically reduced in the transformation.

Within the current, post-transformation Chinook company structure, the officer breakdown is a captain company commander, three lieutenants as flight platoon leaders, and twenty warrant officers.<sup>6</sup> Prior to transformation, the commander was a major who typically wore senior aviator wings<sup>7</sup> and traditionally had held a previous company command (in some cases multiple previous commands). The pre-transformation company also included four

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<sup>5</sup> Lift capabilities and payloads extracted from the TM 1-1520-240-10, the CH-47D Chinook Operator's Manual, Ch. 6. Figures presented are estimates, as environmental conditions where the missions are performed will determine exact aircraft capabilities.

<sup>6</sup> FY06 MTOE from 3d Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Aviation, Fort Drum, New York.

<sup>7</sup> As per AR 600-105, Aviation Service for Rated Army Officers, in order to qualify for senior aviator wings, one must possess at least 7 years of rated aviation service (4 years must be as an Army aviator), at least 84 months of Total Operational Flying Duty Credit, and 1000 hours of flying time.

captains, occupying the billets of operations officer, aviation unit maintenance platoon leader, and two flight platoon leaders. The pre-transformation company rated six lieutenants, four of whom served as flight section leaders. The other two lieutenants served as the petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) platoon leader and the aviation liaison officer.<sup>8</sup>

Although many of these leaders are no longer necessary within the company due to their functions now being performed at battalion level, the reduction in senior leadership within the Chinook company is staggering and severely disproportional to the reduction in number of airframes: eleven officers in the rank of lieutenant and above have been reduced to just four, a major has been replaced by a captain as the senior warfighter in the organization, four captains have disappeared, and six lieutenants have been reduced to just three. Since the average experience level amongst aviation lieutenants is limited<sup>9</sup>, this reorganization potentially puts current Chinook company commanders as the only experienced aviation branch officer in the company. Today's captain company commanders will not only

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<sup>8</sup> FY04 MTOE from 2d Battalion, 52d Aviation, Camp Humphreys, Republic of Korea.

<sup>9</sup> Aviation lieutenants, due to the length of flight school and recently accelerated promotion timetables to captain, generally have no more than two to two and a half years of operational experience prior to promotion to captain, with only twelve to eighteen months of that spent as a flight platoon leader. Best case scenario for a captain in command would be to have three lieutenants with this experience level, with the worst case being all three recently arrived from flight school and have no operational experience. While both extremes are rare, even a combination thereof does not equate to a wealth of experience amongst the company's lieutenants.

command with less rank and experience than majors did previously, but they will also command without four experienced captains to lead their flights into combat. The experience level amongst the post-transformation chain of command will, in all but extreme cases, pale in comparison to what the experience level of the organization's senior leadership once was. With less tactical and technical experience leading flights into combat, the risk of an accident occurring naturally increases. Although the company structure has changed, the mission "to provide aerial movement of troops, supplies, and equipment for support of maneuver, combat support, and combat service support"<sup>10</sup> has not. Chinooks are required to provide the same heavy-lift and general aviation support they have always provided, only with fewer aircraft, a fraction of the leadership, and at increased risk to the aircrews.

#### **Loss of operational and logistical assets**

In addition to the loss of four airframes per company and the reduction in senior leadership, the change from the H-series to the J-series MTOE has removed the operational and logistical assets from the Chinook company that made it self-sustainable. Under the H-series MTOE, the company, given a source of supply, could function independent of its parent battalion or even

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<sup>10</sup> FY04 MTOE from 2d Battalion, 52d Aviation, Camp Humphreys, Republic of Korea. FY06 MTOE from 3d Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Aviation, Fort Drum, New York.



brigade. The H-series Chinook company could be plugged directly into the customer they were supporting, utilizing its staff and sources of supply for sustainment.

Stripped from the H-series MTOE of years past is a healthy flight operations section, consisting of a captain, a lieutenant, a Chief Warrant Officer Three, a Sergeant First Class, and seven more flight operations non-commissioned officers and enlisted Soldiers. The current GSAB's MTOE possesses little more than this at the battalion level. Other assets removed are all NBC and personnel specialists, a supply section of four, a mess section of five, a motor section of sixteen, and a POL platoon of thirty-eight personnel. The largest and most significant loss to the company is without a doubt its Aviation Unit Maintenance (AVUM) Platoon. Consisting of a captain, numerous warrant officers, senior non-commissioned officers, and enlisted aircraft maintainers totaling eighty-eight personnel, the AVUM platoon conducted all unit-level and some intermediate-level maintenance tasks to provide fully mission capable aircraft in support of the company's mission. Although the majority of these assets still exist within other companies of the GSAB, these assets now provide general support to six companies within the battalion. Whether their level of effectiveness will be maintained from the days when they were organic to the Chinook company remains to be seen. Assuming

their outstanding level of maintenance support does continue, the Chinook company has nonetheless been reduced from a robust, self-sustainable organization to a company reliant on its parent battalion for operational and logistical support.<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Faced with an ever-changing threat, the United States Armed Forces will no doubt continue to transform to meet the operational requirements set before them. The United States Army, seeking to enhance its combined arms operations and to incorporate them at lower levels of employment, has tasked the branches of those combined arms with restructuring in order to facilitate the mission of U.S. Soldiers on the ground. Army Aviation has made great strides in supporting this initiative on many fronts. Where it has failed is in stripping a robust, self-sustainable organization of its key assets and making it reliant on its parent unit for operational and logistical support. Today's Chinook company is not the warfighting organization it once was, and it may take years, if ever, to recover its full level of combat effectiveness. Chinook companies should return to the H-series MTOE in order to maintain the level of warfighting capability they have provided to combat, combat support, and combat service support the last

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<sup>11</sup> FY04 MTOE from 2d Battalion, 52d Aviation, Camp Humphreys, Republic of Korea. FY06 MTOE from 3d Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Aviation, Fort Drum, New York.

five decades.

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